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HOBSON'S CHOICE

A POEM

By HENRY AUSTIN

Author of

"Vigilant Verses," "In the Name of the People,"
"Two Days of History," Etc., Etc.



H. F. FENNO & COMPANY

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LIEUTENANT HOBSON

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Hell throned on high where Heaven should be !

Symbol of Cuba—a blazing sky

Floods with flame a glowing sea

Whose foamless, long, slow swells roll high,

Rippling in purple revelry ;

And to the mad Sun's molten beams

Flash back a myriad golden gleams

In a dazzle-dance of devilry.

Hell throned on high and on the deep

And where the Spanish warships hide

In Santiago's bay, asleep,

Rocked softly on the slumbrous tide.

Beneath an awning richly hued,

With fringes like flamingo wings,

Proud lord of splendid solitude,

The Admiral in his hammock swings ;

Blows dreamy smoke in violet rings ;

Nor lets the gloom of real things—

His country's doom and shame—intrude

Upon his old, hidalgo mood.

Poor fox, Cervera, holed at last !
And yet, mayhap, abides with him,
In his hot den, one solace grim :
The harbor's close, torpedoed mouth
By his keen foe may not be passed.
Death lurks beneath each billow there
With grisly grin of dynamite ;
Death rides upon the winds of drouth,
The Yellow Monster of the South ;
And with a stolid, stony glare
Death watches from Zocapa's height,
From Morro's and Estrella's walls ;
And to the Yankee hunter calls,
In cannons' thunderous delight,
With voice as ready as the wave :
“ The Spanish fox, you say, is holed.
So ho, my hunter, blithe and bold,
He bids you welcome to his cave—
Thrice welcome to your Cuban grave !

So muses Sampson, muttering there
A curse—or an inverted prayer ;
Then turns his futile glass to view
The towers of Morro where they loom
Fantastic, with aerial hue,
As clouds that steal the virgin bloom
Of Dawn upon a mountain's crown :
Vain towers Spain builds in many a town
Of her swift-minishing domain
To stand for brags of old renown,
To vaunt how Progress tumbled down,
When the wise, brave Moor was hurled from Spain.
Vain towers, vain Spain, misguided still,
Quixote of Nations, bound to be
A puppet of illusions—till
From trammels of tradition free !

Thus muses Sampson with a thrill
 Of generous pity for the foe—
For the brave nation sunk so low
 And sinking fast and faster yet
Into a slough of deeper ill ;
 But oh ! although her sun hath set,
Shall it not rise again, some time,
 Noble and beautiful and sublime,
When flourishes upon her sod
 The freedom of the sons of God ?

Pensive the Admiral sets aside
 The far-detecting glass ; when lo !
Confronts him there, in manly pride,
 Saluting with an easy, slow,
Grave grace that hints of Southern race,
 A tall broad youth on whose bright face,
Frank as the ocean and the sky,
 Rests with a humorous pleasantness
The elder sailor's calmer eye.

“ Lieutenant Hobson—and, I guess,
You've something you are keen to say ?
Out with it! I am listening.”

“ Yes,

I reckon what I wish to lay
Before you, Admiral, cannot wait.
I've a plan to shut yon gate ;
I can block that narrow strait
So the foe will have to stay,
Till their ships are out of date,
Cooped in Santiago's bay.”

“ Well ? ” the Admiral cries, “ Go on !
I am listening.”

“ Sir, in brief,”
Hobson says, “ 'tis my belief
'Spite of every mine or gun,
Planted there, that I can run
The old collier, Merrimac,
Up that channel's narrow throttle
Like a cork into a bottle ;
Swing her round athwart the track ;
Blow her down and—run away,
So's to fight another day.”

On him, smiling, Sampson smiled
By the closing turn beguiled,
And he answered half in earnest, half in sport:
“If you got the Merrimac
Up so far, I rather guess
That your chance of getting back
Your adventure to report
Would be, surely, somewhat less
Than the little end of nothing, whittled short.”

“Admiral, that’s my look-out.
Give me six men for a crew—
Chaps who know just what to do—
And I’ll ram the vessel in beyond a doubt.
That’s the point, I reckon. Whether
We get back or have to stay
Is a bird of another feather—
And the wind may blow our way.
But suppose our lives are lost,
Still, the gain exceeds the cost,
Still, we win the game we play;
And as for life, why, Admiral, who can tell?
One may lose it any day
Without any gain to speak of. So, a man,
Sure, does well to lose it well,
By my reckoning, if he can.”

“Ay,” quoth Sampson, “for a man
That’s the doctrine ! Now, your plan !
If it suits me like your creed,
You can have the men you need ;
And more, too,
Well I know, will volunteer,
For my sailors have no fear ;
They are all, Lieutenant Hobson, just like you.”

“ Thank you, Admiral, six will do.
More would be a waste of power.
Now—to give you a rough draft
Of the plan which many an hour
Has been steaming in my head—
I will take and strip the ship fore and aft,
Leaving nothing but her engines and her coal,
Two thousand tons,
Which will drive her down like lead
And will hold her down like dead,
When through many a bursting hole
With one rush the ocean runs.

For below her water-line and secure from random shots,
Right in her most vital spots,
On the outside 'gainst her bulkheads ten torpedoes will be laid,
Each one eighty pounds of powder—
Any more would overcrowd her,
I'm afraid.

These, of course, will be connected
By a wire beneath her keel,
Running for some distance aft,
So their force can be projected
In one blow,
From a battery on the raft,
Just the moment that I feel
It is time to let her go.

By the forward anchor placed
Is a man with ax at hand
And a cord runs round his waist
From the bridge where I shall stand.
When we reach the proper spot,
Just beyond Estrella's fort,
Then the helmsman like a shot
Puts her helm hard-a-port ;
Lashes it and plunges aft
For the dingy or the raft.

Next, I signal the engineer,
Close at his reversing-gear,
And he stops the engines' work,
Breaks for deck and takes to sea ;
Then the forward line I jerk
And the bowman, swinging free,
Cuts that anchor's lashings through.
As it slumps, why, he jumps, too,
Swimming back the raft to gain.
In another moment, goes
The stern anchor down its chain
And my last companion throws
Open all the sea-connections
Of the vessel's various sections,
So the waves from all directions
Will come pouring in amain.
We, too, then, to save our mutton,
For the raft now swim our best;
When that's reached, I press a button
And—the powder does the rest.”

“That’s capital,” the Admiral cries,
Promoting with enkindled eyes
Brave Alabama’s bravest son,
As if the pictured deed were done
Already and the whole world lit
By the lofty flame and fame of it.
“But stay ! One point neglected lies
Of your well-thought-out enterprise :
May not the raft be blown up, too ?
Or, barring that, what chance have you
In a hot rain of shot and shell
To get away ? Must you not stay,
At the best reckoning, many a day
Starving in a Spanish cell ?”

“No, sir, as for getting blown up
I am thoroughly assured
By my firm faith in my plan
We shall be too far to leeward,
On our little catamaran,

To be more than slightly thrown up
By the spread of my explosion ;
And we may to outer ocean
Slip away, before the foe,
In their panic and confusion,
Can recover from the blow
Or get over their delusion
That we also, with our ship,
Must have made the downward trip.
But supposing as to trend and force
Of the Merrimac's destruction
I have figured wrongly, why, of course,
It's a very fair deduction
From the doctrine of chances we may get struck
By a flying splinter ; or—worse luck !—
Drawn down, to drown, by her suction ;
Or, possibly, hit by a Spanish gun,
Though that as a miracle might be classed ;
Or captured and into a prison cast—
Which of all events is the likeliest one—
But the deed, the deed, sir, will be done.”

Oh ! volunteers by hundreds—“ Ay, volunteers to burn,”
Sing out the jolly sailor-boys from every ship in turn,
When spreads the call among them all like fire from stem to stern ;
For the chance to share a shining deed not every day befalls
And e'en on the free and wholesome sea men feel their prison-walls
And pine to 'scape from dull routine and shine in action high
For Country, Freedom, Glory—ideals that never die.

How envied are the chosen then, when that rare contest ends,
Alike by officers and men, their rivals and their friends,
Who proudly give to Hobson's pick a storm of parting cheers
And eke o'er many an eye hangs thick a mist of manly tears.

The lights go out: the start is made. Through the blue vast of night,
Among the shadows, like a shade, the dark hull takes her flight.
Stripped to the buff, with hatches off, with cargo ports flung back,
And all agape, a nightmare shape, a monster blind and black,
Glides o'er the tremble of the tide—the fatal Merrimac !

The friendly moon her frightened face behind a cloud conceals,
While mute as death along the shore the secret vessel steals.
As yet unseen, unguessed, undreamed the ship of doom glides on
Till well within the harbor's mouth the first gray shaft of dawn
Strikes her, so closely hugging shore, that on her deck a stone
From Morro's glowering parapet might easily be thrown.

There, black with oil and coal-dust from ankle up to brow,
Phillips and Kelly down below "good-bye" are saying now
To the good old faithful engines; and Murphy at the bow
Is keen to feel the rope tug hard and swing his ax like mad
And at the other anchor another ship-shape lad,
Dan Montague, makes ready to cut—and run—and leap,
When Deignan lashes fast the helm and plunges in the deep.
There, too—his crime must be forgiven, perhaps receive reward—
Who, contrary to orders, smuggled himself on board;
Clausen, that lucky stowaway, whom Fame will keep secure
As long as love of skill and will and courage shall endure;
And on the bridge with Hobson another—to be set
High on the Mount of Memory—graceful and cool Charette.

Gained is the goal and Hobson's plan perfect as clockwork goes ;
For, like their leader, every man a well-trained mettle shows
And as the mighty moment nears, with not a thump of heart
Or jump of nerve or ghost of fear stands firm and plays his part,
Unstunned by roar of guns from shore or thunder soon to come
From the burst ship whose downward trip

shall strike the batteries dumb.

A touch! 'Tis done—and a sudden sun, like a cannon-ball of gold,
Leaps into sight, as a blaze of light, from writhing waves uprolled,
Blinds for a second every eye on wave and raft and shore ;
The stricken ship, like a geyser's lip, spouts fire—in a second more
She makes a plunge like the lightning's lunge,

to the bottom, with one vast roar.

Then over her hugeous hulk's dead bulk

swirls a pall of purple smoke

Which the eight on the raft, now dancing aft,

would take for a kindly cloak

Of cloudy shade, their flight to aid. In vain! Around them close
With flattering gaze of wild amaze a legion of their foes ;
Surrender? Yes, 'twere foolishness, just for the lust of strife,
Now the deed is done and the game is won, lightly to squander life.
So the glorious eight, beloved of Fate, with scarce a scratch or sprain,
Are brought before Cervera now, the bravest lord of Spain.

“ Mother of God ! ” The Admiral gasps, “ Upon the sea’s abyss
And all the foughten fields of man was never a feat like this !
I kiss your hands, brave gentlemen, fair foes, by Fate’s decree
To be as honored captives held in durance kind by me;
Till soon with your great Admiral I trust we shall arrange—
Fair tribute to a deed so grand—a courteous exchange;
And in the name of all brave hearts of every age and race
I greet you, gallant gentlemen, I praise you to your face.
Such deeds, meseems, demand a blend of craft and nerve and skill,
Endurance to the martyr’s end, serene and godlike will.”

“ Nay, one thing more, Sir Admiral,” thus Hobson’s answer came
“ A passion for Humanity—a just and noble aim ! ”

Shame, or perchance ’twas anger, flushed on the Spaniard’s face,
But like a passing cloud of dawn to the soul’s high light gave place.
He bowed his proud head lower still; then swift commandment gave,
With a white flag to take the news of their capture o’er the wave
Unto his brother Admiral—who shall his captor be
Ere many a full-orbed moon hath danced upon the Cuban sea:
The Cuban sea that, singing free, with loud, proud, thunderous voice
Gives meaning new and grandly true

to the old phrase, “ Hobson’s Choice.”



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